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THE TRUE BELIEVER

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FOURTH
PRESBY
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Mark 9:14-29

"I believe; help my unbelief"
Mark 9:24b (NRSV)

What does a true believer look like? It's a good and complicated question. And, as is usually the case with complicated questions, the answer depends on who you ask.

William Buckley says that if you even mention the word "God" at a dinner party in New York the response will be a sudden and awkward silence in the conversation and looks of disdain. If you say the name "God" a second time, you will not be invited back. You have surely heard that a dozen times by now. But it is true, is it not, in Chicago as well as New York?

Something like that observation is the reason behind and the thesis of one of the books everybody has been reading: *The Culture of Disbelief* by Stephen Carter. In the book Carter offers a variation on the theme by Buckley:

> "One good way to end a conversation or start an argument is to tell a group of well-educated professionals that you hold a political position because it is required by your understanding of God's will." [p. 23]

Professor Carter is not a theologian. He's a lawyer. He teaches at the Yale Law School and he argues that while, on the one hand, we are the most religious culture in the world, and far more Americans attend church, pray and believe in God than any other nation in the West, on the other hand our culture is predisposed not to take religious belief very seriously.

> "Those who pray – indeed those who believe in God – are encouraged to keep it a secret, and often a shameful one at that. Aside from the ritual appeals to God that we expect from our politicians, for Americans to take their religion seriously, is to risk assignment to the lunatic fringe." [p. 4]

Part of the problem, as Professor Carter sees it, is the complicated constitutional separation of church and state, intended originally to prevent the incursion of government into religion or the favoring of one religion over another by the state, but which today is often used in the courts, it seems to prevent the appearance of Christian religion publicly. A Colorado school teacher was ordered to remove the Bible from her desk, although she was welcome to openly display books on Native American religion or satanic cults. A recent celebrated law suit involved a proposed prohibition against humming or whistling Christian hymns in the workplace. The resolution, I think, was that humming is allowed but not too loudly.

It is complicated and important. Does your right to be free from religion have precedence over my right to practice mine, particularly when mine requires me to tell you about it until you accept it as yours? Or does your right to witness to the truth as you know it have precedence over my right to receive a medical procedure – like an abortion – without your blocking the sidewalk, or shouting at me?

It has been our church's position that when the issues are not clear, it is far better to err on the side of respecting individual liberty, not to be subjected to state supported religion and to be free to practice your religion so long as you are not hurting someone else. We would, I think, want the teacher's right to have the Bible on her desk, or to wear a yarmulke, or a turban, but we are opposed to praying in public schools or the school structuring time for prayer or religious instruction.

The issues of school prayer or nativity scenes at City Hall get all the attention but they are not really the problem. The problem is a culture not disposed to take religious belief intellectually seriously.

> "The message of contemporary culture," says Professor Carter, "is that it is perfectly all right to believe that stuff, but you really ought to keep it to yourself." [p. 25]

It is an issue that each of us faces in one way or another every day. In the culture of disbelief, getting out of bed, getting dressed up on a hot humid morning to sit in an unair-conditioned building for an hour or so is a publicly counter-culture act.

The real issue is, of course, what does it mean to be a believer? What is the nature of this phenomenon we call religious faith?

In a delightful new book Barbara Brown Taylor says that

> "most of us have pretty firm beliefs about what it means to believe. One common idea is that believers are never at a loss for words. They can say what they believe and why . . . they are never embarrassed – always articulate, eloquent and wise. Another common idea about belief is that believers are in constant touch with God, never doubtful or afraid. When they say their prayers at night, God talks back to them." As for this public Sunday morning business. . .Rev. Taylor says the common assumption is that true believers "invariably find worship a meaningful experience, never lose their place and they never feel bored, or cranky, or left out."
> [*The Preaching Life*, p. 143, 144]

Well, I don't know about you, but that leaves me on the outside. If a believer is one who knows the truth with an unfailing certainty, who never doubts, most people aren't going to qualify. In fact, many thoughtful people have concluded that intellectual certainty doesn't have a whole lot to do with faith; in fact, not as much as doubt. Rollo May observed that

> "Creative people admit doubt and explore it."

And Spanish philosopher Unamuno,

> "Life is doubt, and faith without doubt is dead."

If a true believer lives in minute by minute dialogue with God and has a love affair with religion, is without interruption or distraction or irritation or bored, I frankly don't know many people who qualify. So perhaps we ought to go on a little deeper and inquire about the very basic nature of believing. What is it? What does a believer look like? And in pursuit of that inquiry may I bring now to the table one of my very favorite people, my nominee for "True Believer." There are a lot of personalities in scripture who are compelling and with whom you and I can identify. This man is my favorite – he's a father; he loves his child, his son; he will do whatever he has to, whatever is necessary to help his son. He learns painfully that finally, there are limits to his ability to help. It is a difficult admission for him. He says something extraordinary to Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief."

The incident begins with an argument between some religious authorities and the friends of Jesus. A man had brought his son to the disciples to be healed. The disciples had tried but it hadn't worked. Now they are arguing about it. I'll bet the scribes, the religious types, were saying something like: "We told you so."

Enter Jesus. "What are you arguing about?" Someone answers, "It's my son – I brought him to you. He's very sick, he has convulsions, he falls to the ground and foams at the mouth. I asked your disciples to heal him but they could not."

"Bring him to me," Jesus says and just then the boy has a convulsion. It surely was what we know as epilepsy which we are still trying to understand and which in the first century was a condition shrouded in mystery and fear.

A few months ago I told about a conversation I had with a friend of mine whose eighteen-year-old son, a college freshman, had begun to have seizures and who was bravely trying to finish his first year in college with this terrible thing happening to him, without warning and with increasing frequency, walking around campus, in class, studying and suddenly the mysterious, terrible convulsion. It was a form of epilepsy. Neurosurgery was scheduled for summer. And I was moved by my friend, a father who, when I asked how his family was, telling me all this: "All his life," he said, "I've been able to make things okay for him. Now I can't. I can't do a damn thing." I'm happy to report the surgery was successful: the boy is fine. My friend is now worrying about keeping him quiet enough for proper recuperation to happen and strength to return. I thought of him a lot as I worked through this text again.

"If you are able to do anything have pity on us and help us." Do you realize how difficult it was for that man to say that? I see him on his knees, cradling his son who is in the midst of an epileptic seizure, wiping his face, patting him, tears of pain and frustration and anger streaming down his face.

"If you are able! All things are possible for the one who believes," Jesus says. Immediately – without a moment's hesitation – the father cries out, "I believe; help my unbelief." And his son was healed.

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall, one of the most provocative and helpful thinkers around says that this is the most meaningful verse in the Bible for modern Christians; this prayer: "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief."

The reason, Hall says, and others agree, is that most modern Christians could pray that prayer, because spiritually that is where they are, somewhere between belief and unbelief, or perhaps more accurately, belief and unbelief all mixed up together.

What do you suppose the man meant when he said, "I believe"? What exactly did he believe? The text itself does not provide an answer but I sense that we're not talking about theological orthodoxy, creeds, intellectual assertions about the nature of God.

Professor Hall says that when modern Christians say, "I believe," they mean one of two things. They mean "I believe these ideas to be true. . .the objective definition of faith. God is. God created, God's son was Jesus. I believe those are facts. They are true. I believe them." Or we may mean, "I experience God in my life. I feel God's love, grace, forgiveness, power. I believe because I experience the reality." The subjective definition of faith.

Professor Hall says that both of those definitions of belief are inadequate.

> "Faith," he says, "is a category of relationship and a fundamental trust. Faith is what occurs, from the human side, when we know ourselves to be encountered, judged and accepted by the gracious God." [*Thinking The Faith*, p. 249]

You may have heard or read something about the controversy in the Presbyterian and Methodist and other mainline churches over a conference last November, "Re-Imagining God – Community . . . Church," which brought together Christian feminist theologians from all over the world to talk about God and faith in new ways. Some Presbyterian money helped fund the conference and some Presbyterian women helped plan it. 400 of the 2,000 persons in attendance, including 20 national staff persons were Presbyterians. Well, in the process of Re-Imagining God, some of the theology went places where Presbyterian theology has not gone before. And some of the language about God sounded to some people like a pagan goddess, not the God of Judeo-Christian faith. It sounded to some like the Presbyterian Church didn't know what it believes any more or didn't care. And it struck a very deep nerve across our church. People got angry at what seemed like a frivolous and unfaithful use of church funds and a lack of common sense and responsive leadership at the national level. And the women who attended the conference and thought it was wonderful got angry at the people who were angry at them. And it got so bad that some people thought the Presbyterian family might come apart over the whole thing.

Fifty of our Presbyteries strenuously objected and sent overtures to the national church demanding some response: an investigation, reprimands, firing; no burning at the stake, although the word "heresy" was used openly and frequently. Several hundred congregations stopped supporting Presbyterian mission and withheld the operating funds which allow us to exist as a national organization. There were a lot of accusations, name-calling, hand wringing and general despair.

I was asked to moderate the committee at the annual national General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church which was assigned the task of responding to the fifty overtures and thousands of unhappy Presbyterians and generally do something to get us out of this mess.

We did, I think, at least for now. There are difficult issues ahead, issues about which Presbyterian Christians disagree profoundly. Many of them have to do with what it means to believe in a culture of disbelief. And many of those issues have to do with sexuality. Specifically the Presbyterian Church must discuss and decide again whether or not to ordain to ministry and office lesbian and gay Presbyterians. Some believe there is no way to make a decision about that question either way – without breaking the church apart.

In any event, I'll be talking more about that experience and the General Assembly's work next Sunday at 9:45 a.m. I mention it now because the committee I moderated decided early on that the crisis was basically theological; this matter of what it means to be a believer. Is it knowing or feeling or is it a matter, as Professor Hall suggests, of trusting? The committee said that the Presbyterian Church stands in a theological tradition which acknowledges as truth, certain ideas about God, Jesus Christ, the Church, the Bible, and the Christian life. Those ideas are precious and important; they are true for us. When they are contradicted or ridiculed, we ought to say what they are and why they are precious to us.

And the committee said that part of our theological tradition is a rejection of the idea that human formulations, human institutions, human creeds and theologies are absolute. Presbyterians, perhaps more than any other branch of the holy catholic church, understand that. Words about God are human words. Creeds are human formulations. God, alone, is absolute and ultimate. And so human imagination is required always to analyze how we speak about God and affirm belief in God.

I think we said to the General Assembly and the Church and the world, what this man said to Jesus one day in the midst of a heart-wrenching crisis over which he had no control. "I believe; help my unbelief."

If anything permanently helpful comes out of this perhaps it is the recovery of the one common ground on which we can all stand, theological conservatives and liberals, evangelicals, social activists, zealots and ice cold Calvinists, namely faith as relationship, faith as trust; belief – not in ideas about God – but trust in God: commitment, not to specific statements about Jesus Christ, but to him, the man we know as Lord and Savior.

Perhaps we are moving toward a definition of faith that acknowledges doubt; a definition of faith that involves fear and anxiety; a theology of light, but also darkness. A theology of the word that includes silence.

On the day I prepared this sermon I found this poem in the daily devotional I use:

> "Why no! I never thought other than
> That God is that great absence
> In our lives, the empty silence
> Within, the place where we go
> Seeking, not in hope to
> Arrive or find . . . the darkness
> Between stars . . . His are the echoes
> We follow, the footprints he has just left."
> ["Via Negative," R. S. Thomas in *Daybook*, Summer 1994]

What that father brought to Jesus was not a fully worked out theology or personal statement of faith. It was not even his exemplary life of piety, prayer and devotion. What he brought was a heart full of love for his son, and a willingness, for the sake of that love to be courageous, strong and vulnerable.

His belief was not intellectual or spiritual even. It was almost physical. It was a matter of coming to find Jesus: asking for help: being absolutely honest about his own belief and unbelief, not pretending or posturing. And then saying it – "I believe; help my unbelief."

Jesus can do a lot with that. I bid you in some way to do that: to come to Jesus with what belief and unbelief you have, and to trust him.

It's why we keep coming to church on hot, humid Sunday mornings when we could be doing other more comfortable, more exciting, pleasurable, even more interesting things, is it not? We keep coming back to Jesus with our faith and doubt, our hopes and aspirations, our fears and regrets, our dreams. . .our most precious loves, our lives.

"I believe; help my unbelief."

He can do a lot with that.

Amen.